
August 16, 2024
Commentary

Weekly Economic Perspectives

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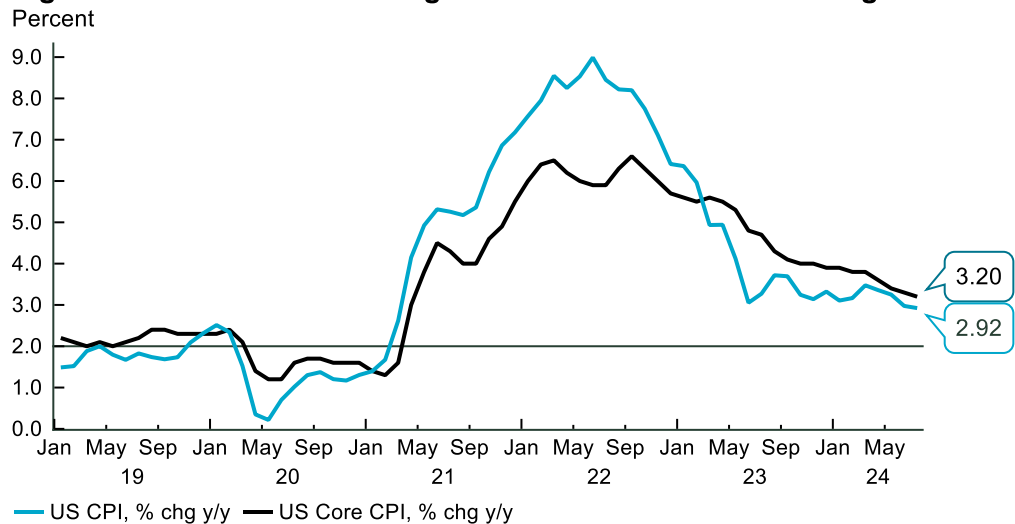
The Economy

Road clears for a Fed cut in September.

US

The July **inflation** data was slightly better than expected, but there was enough there in the details to preclude too jubilant an interpretation. Indeed, the market reaction was very muted. Both overall and core (ex-food and energy) prices increased 0.2% m/m, allowing the two respective measures of inflation to ease one tenth, to 2.9% y/y and 3.2% y/y, respectively. The headline print marked the first sub-3.0% reading since March 2021.

Figure 1: Further Modest Progress Towards US Inflation Target



Sources: Macrobond, SSGA Economics, BLS

A lot of categories came in softer than anticipated, which introduces the risk of some reversion higher next month. For example, food and energy were quite well behaved, with food prices up a moderate 0.2% m/m and energy flat. Used vehicle prices dropped 2.3% m/m, more than we anticipated given Manheim auction data, and medical services surprised heavily to the downside with a 0.3% m/m decline. The only significant real upside surprise in July came from shelter, specifically rents. Having eased noticeably in June, rent of primary residence unexpectedly jumped 0.488% m/m, the highest three-decimal reading since May 2023. This does not jive with signals from other rent inflation metrics and so, we'll do what we always think is wise when we get extreme readings in an indicator in consecutive months: take the average. This leaves the gentle downtrend of the past year well in place; if anything, we would not be surprised to see either a downward revision to the July data, or another big step down in August. Given the mix of upside and downside surprises in the July report, and our expectation of some reversion next month, as things stand, we look for a similar 0.2% m/m increase in overall prices in August, which would lower the inflation rate three tenths to 2.6% y/y.

The **Fed** has everything it needs to deliver a 25 basis point (bp) rate cut in September. But not 50 bp...at least not without a really bad August employment

report. Having long advocated for a summer start to rate cuts, we find ourselves in the odd position of pushing back against what now appear to be unwarranted calls for a 50 bp cut in September. It's not that the macro data do not warrant rates being 50 bp lower than where they are. Rather, having signaled a single 2024 rate cut in the June Summary of Economic Projections (SEP), the Fed would need something more dramatic than what has transpired so far to deliver a jumbo cut in September. Assuming that the data do not force the FOMC's hand beforehand, we think a 25 bp in September, alongside an updated dot plot showing 3-4 cuts this year is a much more balanced approach.

The value of a gradual approach was reinforced by the much stronger than expected July **retail sales** report. Admittedly, the details weren't nearly as robust as the 1.0% m/m jump in total sales would suggest, but this was nonetheless above all expectations and helped alleviate investor fears of an imminent sharp downturn in consumer demand. The truth is likely somewhere in the middle, with the underlying trend in demand likely closer to the 0.3% m/m increase in control sales (excluding food services, building materials, autos dealers and gas stations). Just like in June, there were some big moves across the components, in many cases, in the opposite direction. For example, having declined 3.4% m/m in June, sales of motor-vehicles and parts jumped 3.6% in July. Having declined 1.1% m/m in June, sales of electronics rebounded 1.7% in July. By contrast, after a 1.7% gain in June, "miscellaneous" sales plunged 2.5% in July; while online sales grew a mere 0.2% m/m in July following June's blockbuster 2.2% surge. Perhaps it is worth paying more attention to the y/y performance, which is far from great. Seasonally adjusted nominal retail sales are only 2.7% higher than in July 2024; given the increase in inflation in the intervening period, this leaves real sales flat to slightly negative y/y.

Housing activity continues to languish. **Housing starts** declined 6.8% m/m in July, but performance was actually worse than this number suggests because there was a massive plunge in single-family starts (down 14.1% m/m) that compared in magnitude to the experience of March-April 2020. Multi-family starts jumped 14.5%, offering some support. Both segments remain well below-year earlier levels, however, with single family starts down 14.8% y/y and multi-family starts down 18.4% y/y. Meanwhile, **building permits** more than retraced June's increase to settle at the lowest level since June 2020.

Homebuilder confidence continues to worsen. The **NAHB (National Association of Homebuilders) index** ticked down two more points to 39 in August, exactly half its level in August 2020 and the lowest level this year. Buyer traffic and present sales showed further erosion, while sales expectations improved incrementally. The dynamic makes sense: we've argued previously that rate cuts may create a bit of an air pocket in housing demand as it incentivizes buyers to wait for lower mortgage rates even as demand deferral may also put some downward pressure on prices.

Industrial production disappointed in July. Not only did output shrink by 0.6% (double the anticipated rate) but there was a meaningful downward revision to the June data centered on manufacturing. As a result, the y/y comparison turned negative again (-0.2% y/y). Sequentially, there was a big pullback in utilities in July that followed three strong back to back increases; mining was flat, and manufacturing output shrank 0.3% m/m.

Consumer sentiment improved modestly in August, according to preliminary readings on the University of Michigan consumer sentiment index. The 1.4-point improvement retraced about 80% of July's decline and was attributable exclusively to better expectations. Assessments of the current economic situation actually worsened. As to the rise in expectations, the most noticeable uptick was among democratic party supporters, with sentiment among independents up only marginally, and down among republican party supporters. Clearly, President Biden's decision to not seek re-election has had an impact on consumer sentiment. Elsewhere, inflation expectations were stable. Short-term (1 year) inflation expectations were unchanged at 2.9% and long-term (5-10 year) inflation expectations were unchanged at 3.0%, where they've stood since April.

Canada

Building permits fell by 13.9% in June, against the expectation of a gain of 6.0% and following a substantial decline in previous month (-12.7%). Losses were broad, with residential and non-residential permits down 11.5% and 18.1%, respectively.

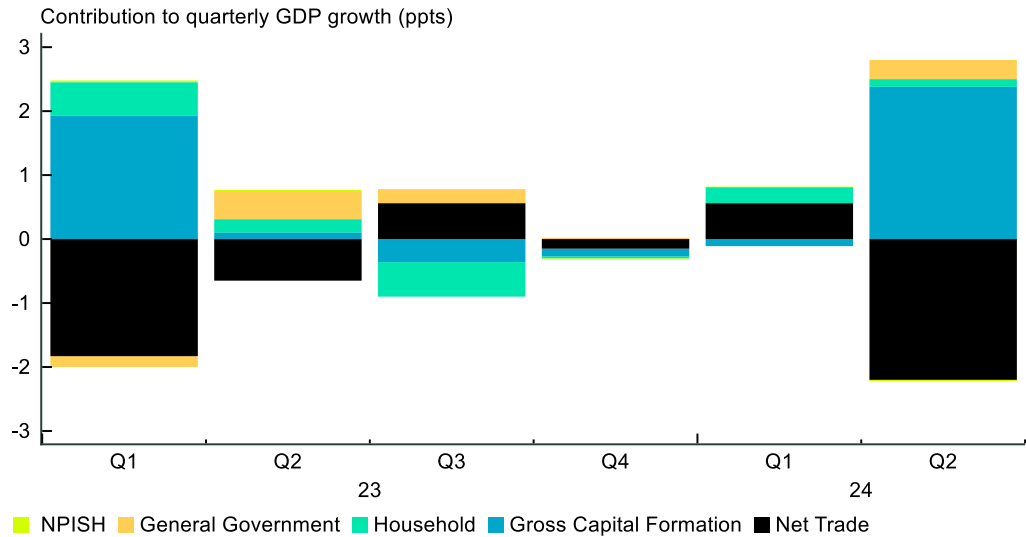
The housing market remained subdued in July as borrowing costs remained elevated. **Existing home sales** fell by 0.7% m/m in July and was 9% below their pre-pandemic level. The decline was led by lower sales in B.C. (-1.3% m/m), Quebec (-1.1%) and Ontario (-0.6%). New listings were up 0.9% m/m in July. With lower sales and higher listings, the sales-to-new listings ratio dropped 0.8 ppts to 52.7, below average.

Housing starts rebound strongly in July, increasing by 16% m/m to 279.5k annualized units, well above market expectation of 245k units. The gain was largely due to the increase in multi-family sector, with urban starts up 21% m/m to 217.3k units. Regionally, the rebound was led by the increases in Ontario, Prairies, and B.C.

UK

The UK has had a stronger-than-expected rebound so far this year, supported by food disinflation, rising in real wages, and lower utility bills. In Q2, the UK's **GDP** grew by 0.6% q/q, in line with market expectation and just slightly lower than Q1's 0.7% q/q gain. On the expenditure side, gross capital formation, government consumption, and household spending were the major contributors to quarterly growth, partially offset by a decline in net trade. However, household consumption seems to have lost its momentum while business investments remained weak. Household spending's growth in Q2 was only 0.2% q/q, down from 0.4% q/q in previous quarter, while business investment fell by 0.1% q/q during the quarter and was 1.1% lower compared to the same period a year ago. Coupled with fiscal constraint and long-term productivity problems, this might lead to a slowdown in GDP growth during the second half of the year. Meanwhile, **retail sales** have returned to growth, but the extent was slightly less than expected, by 0.5% m/m in July, compared to market expectations of an increase of 0.6% m/m. The gain was also concentrated on one sector. Department stores posted a 4.0% m/m gain while other non-food stores and online sales grew by 2.5% m/m and 0.7% m/m respectively, reflecting the impact of summer discounts and sport events.

Figure 2: UK Economy Doing Well So Far This Year



Sources: Macrobond, SSGA Economics, ONS
Updated as of 8/16/2024

As good as the GDP news, **services inflation** was down sharply to a two-year low of 5.2% in July, from 5.7% in June, and was well below the BoE’s forecast of 5.6%. Headline inflation also increased less than expected to 2.2% in July from 2.0% previous month, versus market expectations of 2.3% and the BoE estimate of 2.4%. In theory, this is welcome news, but we doubt that it will have significant impact on BoE’s rate cuts. Firstly, the latest downside surprise in service inflation seems more like noise, given that restaurants and hotels were the largest downward contributor, following June’s surge in hotel prices. Secondly, in its August meeting, the BoE has drawn a separation between services inflation and policy. For now, we continue to expect a rate cut in November, followed by another one in December.

The latest **labor market** report revealed a mixed picture, but unlikely to have any impact on future rate cuts. The unemployment rate declined two tenths to 4.2% in the three months to June, bucking expectations of a rise to 4.5%. However, given the problems with the Labour Force Survey, the BoE is likely to disregard the latest change in the unemployment rate. Meanwhile, job vacancies declined incrementally to 884k in the three months to July. Wage growth decelerated markedly but mostly on account of base effects. The three-month y/y rate of average earnings growth (including bonus) fell sharply from 5.7% to 4.5%, largely due to the NHS one-off bonus payments paid in June 2023 while the rate excluding bonuses inched down from 5.8% to 5.4%, remaining elevated.

Eurozone

Slow and steady may not necessarily win the race, but at least it helps you advance. So it was with **eurozone real GDP** growth in the second quarter: the economy expanded by 0.3% q/q, matching the Q1 performance and leaving real GDP 0.6% higher y/y. No details were available with this release.

After a modest retreat in July, the **Zew index** of **German** investor confidence experienced its largest monthly decline in two years in August. The headline plunged 22.6 points to the lowest level since January. We don't want to read too much into a single month, but this certainly bears watching.

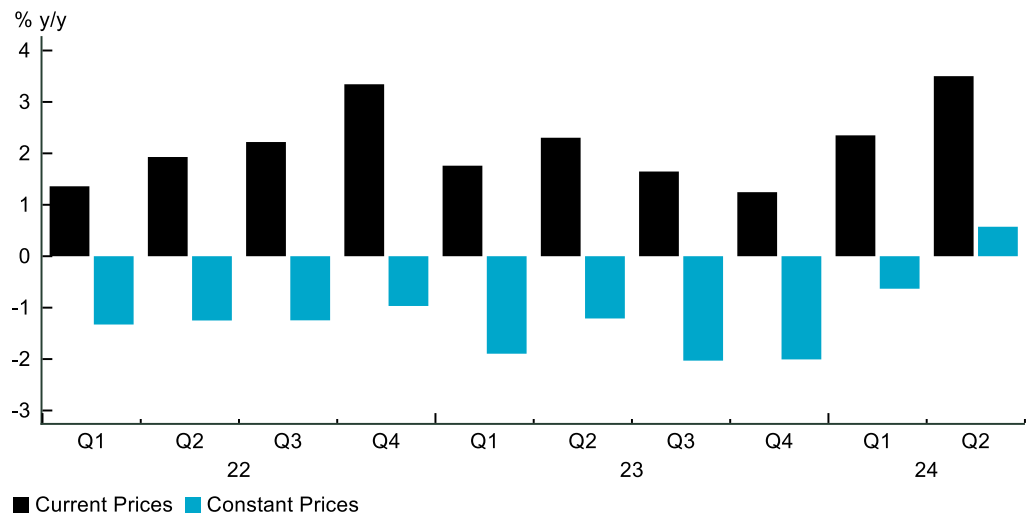
Japan

The **Bank of Japan** (BoJ) lifted their policy rate to 0.25% and began to run down JGB purchases in July. The bank also announced plans to reduce its monthly JGB purchases to 3 trillion yen by March 2026. That the move came with market volatility was to be expected. What took us by surprise was the extent of volatility; the yen appreciated nearly 10%, and Japanese equities saw equally rapid moves (although have been recovering since). Deputy Governor Shinichi Uchida later said that low market volatility is vital for the next hike. The Bank may want to assess the impact of the July hike and confirm intact economic fundamentals before acting again.

GDP data for Q2 showed that the domestic demand finally turned a corner; regular readers know our forecast of a marked consumption recovery. In the event, real GDP growth blew past expectations at 3.1% q/q saar (2.3% consensus). Household consumption grew 4.0%, twice as expected! This rebound from a benign Q1 was also due to the resumption of auto production. The bigger surprise was the improvement in employee compensation, which not only rose an impressive 0.8% q/q, but revisions ensured that it rose in the past three quarters! Resultingly, real compensation's annual growth rate has turned positive in Q2 (figure 3).

Figure 3: Higher Wages Are Now Turning Japanese Consumption

Compensation Of Employees In Japan



Sources: SSGA Economics, CAO, Macrobond
Updated as of 8/19/2024

Capex and residential investments too improved by 3.6% and 6.7% respectively. However, higher growth in imports (7.1%) than exports (5.9%) meant that real exports dragged growth by 0.1 ppts.

The GDP data validates our view that the BoJ is pursuing a very good monetary policy under Governor Kazuo Ueda. We maintain our terminal policy rate forecast of 1.0% by December 2025. However, with the US Fed more likely to commence a cutting cycle from September, our terminal forecast has downside risks, and the next hike may not come till December. The Bank will want to ensure that consumption remain strong before the next move. We still expect soft-landing in the US and Japan, but the yen will remain crucial; the BoJ may want to maintain the yen at a neutral level where imports do not outweigh exports.

All this means that the BoJ still has a tough job ahead, but we are more confident on the economy and the Bank’s ability to gently raise interest rates. We expect the Governor to emphasize these points during his Diet testimony next week. Also, the nationwide CPI for July may have risen 2.8% y/y.

Australia

The labor market data’s mixed characterization continued in July. **Employment** rose 58.2k in July, nearly three times as much as expected. This is the second month when employment grew over 50k, and led by full-time employment (60.5k in July). Given the Reserve Bank of Australia’s (RBA) hawkish inclinations, they may take a stronger signal from the labor market data than from cooling inflation.

However, a higher participation rate of 67.1% ensured that the **unemployment rate** ticked up a tenth to 4.2%, the highest since January 2022. The 3-month moving average is now 0.5 pp above the 12-month low, meaning that the infamous Sahm rule has been triggered. The rule is more applicable in the US, but has implications in Australia as well, which has essentially been indicated by the Beveridge Curve (figure 4). We had earlier identified nine cycles in Australia’s full-time employment (see [here](#)), and each time it declines from a peak, the Beveridge Curve suggested a rise in unemployment, which is consistent with July’s data print.

Figure 4: The Beveridge Curve When Full-Time Employment Declines From Peaks



Source: SSGA Economics, ABS, ANZ-Indeed, Macrobond

Governor Michele Bullock testified in front of the Parliament and said that it is “premature to be thinking about rate cuts”, given that inflation is “still too high”. However, “circumstances may change”; we believe they will in two weeks, as the headline CPI will decline sequentially in July, bringing the annual rise within the RBA’s target band. This will be mostly the work of higher electricity subsidies and the RBA may downplay the decline. Inflation is cooling, nonetheless.

Business conditions improved a touch but remained benign in July. The NAB business survey’s headline conditions index improved two points to 6. More importantly, the improvement came due to a rebound in the employment index to 7, more than reversing the last month’s decline. Furthermore, labor costs jumped a full percentage point to 2.5%, perhaps reflecting a higher minimum wage. For our part, the most important development was that **price pressures continued to cool**. Retail prices declined four-tenths to 0.9% and purchase costs declined two-tenths to 1.1%. These significant easing in price measures is the key signal we have been taking from the recent data flow.

This mix of easing price pressures and still healthy job market should be the ideal outcome for the RBA, as they aim to soft-land the economy despite high rates.

The NAB’s Q2 Consumer Sentiment Survey (released earlier in July) showed that Australians are tackling high cost of living smartly, as they are potentially saving A\$ 3,840 a year by cutting back on spending on major household items, holidaying and other on discretionary spendings such as eating out and entertainment. 60% of the 2,000 surveyed were able to use such savings for day to day living expenses, while 40% were able to save the money, while only 5% were able to pay down their mortgage or debt.

Separately, the more widely tracked **consumer sentiment** metric from the Melbourne Institute rebounded 2.8% m/m to 85.0 in August. The rebound was broad-based, but the index still remains near its cyclical low. The unemployment expectations index rose 3.8% m/m, indicating increased likelihood ahead. Expectations of the level of interest rates declined 14.9%, primarily as consumers were relieved that the RBA did not hike in August.

The Q2 **wage price index** showed that wage growth has peaked. Wages grew 0.8% q/q, a tenth below the consensus and down from a peak of 1.3% in Q3 2023. The last quarter’s data was revised marginally higher, which left this quarter’s annual growth rate at 4.1% y/y. The composition showed that individual and collective agreements made smaller additions to the headline. However, acute cost of living is reflective in broadening wages; the share of jobs associated with wage growth of over 4.0% has reached a new high of over 45%.

Week in Review (Aug 12 –Aug 16)

Country	Release (Date, format)	Consensus	Actual	Last	Comments
Monday, Aug 12					
CA	Building Permits (Jun, m/m)	6.0%	-13.9%	-12.7% (↓)	Dissappointing.
JN	PPI (Jul, y/y)	3.1%	3.0%	2.9%	Turning higher.
AU	Westpac Consumer Conf Index (Aug)	na	85.0	82.7	Details remain poor.
AU	Wage Price Index (Q2, y/y)	4.0%	4.1%	4.1%	Sequential decline lifted by revisions.
AU	NAB Business Confidence (Jul)	na	1	3 (↓)	Surveys continue showing slowing sentiments.
Tuesday, Aug 13					
US	NFIB Small Business Optimism (Jul)	91.5	93.7	91.5	Modest improvement.
US	PPI Final Demand (Jul, y/y)	2.3%	2.2%	2.7% (↑)	Welcome.
UK	Average Weekly Earnings (Jun, y/y, 3m)	4.6%	4.5%	5.7%	Largely due to base effects.
UK	ILO Unemployment Rate (Jun, 3m)	4.5%	4.2%	4.4%	Question on the reliability of the data.
GE	ZEW Survey Expectations (Aug)	34.0	19.2	41.8	Big step down.
Wednesday, Aug 14					
US	CPI (Jul, y/y)	3.0%	2.9%	3.0%	Good for 25 bp rate cut in September.
UK	CPI (Jul, y/y)	2.3%	2.2%	2.0%	Good.
EC	GDP (Q2, q/q, prelim)	0.3%	0.3%	0.3%	Modest but OK.
EC	Industrial Production (Jun, m/m)	0.5%	-0.1%	-0.9% (↓)	Soft.
FR	CPI (Jul, y/y, final)	2.3% (p)	2.3%	2.2%	As previously reported.
JN	GDP (Q2, q/q, prelim)	0.6%	0.8%	-0.6%	Great data; quells doubts on consumption.
AU	Employment (Jul, m/m, thous)	20.0	58.2	52.3 (↑)	Cyclical revival in employment?
AU	Unemployment Rate (Jul)	4.1%	4.2%	4.1%	May keep rising.
Thursday, Aug 15					
US	Empire Manufacturing (Aug)	-6.0	-4.7	-6.6	Modest.
US	Retail Sales Advance (Jul, m/m)	0.4%	1.0%	-0.2% (↓)	Upside surprise but control sales more modest
US	Philadelphia Fed Business Outlook (Aug)	5.2	-7.0	13.9	Sizable step down.
US	Initial Jobless Claims (Aug 10, thous)	235	227	234 (↑)	In recent range.
US	Continuing Claims (Aug 03, thous)	1,870	1,864	1,871 (↓)	In gentle uptrend.
US	Import Price Index (Jul, y/y)	1.5%	1.6%	1.5% (↓)	No big surprises.
US	Industrial Production (Jul, m/m)	-0.3%	-0.6%	0.3% (↓)	Manufacturing contracted.
US	NAHB Housing Market Index (Aug)	43.0	39.0	41.0 (↓)	Lowest level this year.
CA	Existing Home Sales (Jul, m/m)	na	-0.7%	3.7%	Housing market remained subdued.
UK	GDP (Q2, q/q, prelim)	0.6%	0.6%	0.7%	Good.
Friday, Aug 16					
US	Housing Starts (Jul, thous)	1,333	1,238	1,329 (↓)	Very weak.
US	Building Permits (Jul, thous)	1,425	1,396	1,454 (↑)	Weak.
US	U. of Mich. Sentiment (Aug, prelim)	66.9	67.8	66.4	Expectations better, current situation worse.
CA	Housing Starts (Jul, thous)	245.0	279.5	241.7	Strong rebound.
UK	Retail Sales Inc Auto Fuel (Jul, m/m)	0.6%	0.5%	-0.9% (↑)	OK.

Source: for data, Bloomberg®; for commentary, SSGA Economics.

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* Pensions & Investments Research Center, as of December 31, 2023.

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